



Change managerialism and micro-processes of sensemaking during change implementation



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 May 2015

Received in revised form 23 February 2017

Accepted 28 February 2017

Available online 19 March 2017

Keywords:

Sensemaking
Organizational change
Managerialism
Reflexivity
Performativity

ABSTRACT

In this article we critically analyze micro-processes of sensemaking during change implementation under a macro-level discourse of top-down planned change management, which we coin 'change managerialism'. We demonstrate how taken-for-granted enactments of managing change interweave with organizational change discourses and how this subsequently inhibits sensemaking micro-processes. Adopting a reflexive research methodology, this article contributes to the sensemaking of change literature by illustrating how change managerialism infiltrates an organization's managerial change discourse and sensemaking micro-processes, causing a disruption in sensemaking. Empirical material of a case study conducted at a professional services firm suggests these dynamics unintentionally inhibit sensemaking micro-processes and bracket off direct experience of the organization's change recipients through lifeworld colonization, detachment, discursive closure and constrained reflexivity.

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1. Introduction

Sensemaking and change in organizations are research topics that go hand in hand: uncertainty, equivocality, and paradox induced by either planned or emergent change represent a major trigger for sensemaking (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Empirical research in the field of management and organization studies illuminated in the past decades how organizations and their members make sense of change (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Helms-Mills, 2003; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Maitlis, 2005), emphasizing the cognitive, social, and discursive micro-processes of sensemaking. Although this research broadly acknowledges that sensemaking does not unfold in a vacuum (Taylor & Van Every, 1999; Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), there is a penchant to assume that sense is predominantly enacted in intra-organizational contexts, merely assuming the taken-for-granted presence of macro-level forces, without exploring the deeper mechanisms and processes through which micro-processes of sensemaking are affected. In short, the dynamics through which specific and dominant 'macro-level discourses' (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2014) shape sensemaking processes remains under researched.

When it comes to organizational change, sensemaking processes seem not only to be guided by individual and organizational actions, they are also influenced by unquestioned and often unwittingly held assumptions and commonly held beliefs about reality 'out there' (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008). Much of the change literature is in this respect grounded in onto-epistemological assumptions of being-realism (Chia & Tsoukas, 2003; Stacey, 2011; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) granting primacy to stability, rational choice, and planned top-down approaches towards change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008; Burnes, 2005; Chia, 1999; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). This strand of the literature conceives organizational change as a top-down planned managerial process. In line with Alvesson and Sveningsson (2011) we coin this a discourse of 'change managerialism'. It is precisely the process of how such macro-level discourses, in this particular case the discourse of change managerialism, affects sensemaking micro-processes that remains largely under-researched in the sensemaking literature (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weber & Glynn, 2006).

Therefore, this article sets out to illustrate how a change managerialism discourse interweaves with an organization's managerial change discourse and sensemaking micro-processes. We analyze, based on empirical material from a case study conducted at a professional service firm, how change managerialism – largely unintentionally and unwittingly – affects the sensemaking processes of organizational actors that are supposed

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to bring the planned change alive. This paper thus addresses the following research question: *How does change managerialism influence sensemaking micro-processes during the implementation of planned organizational change?* More specifically, we look into (1) the process through which change managerialism infuses the organization's change discourse, and (2) the effect of this 'mixed' change discourse on sensemaking micro-processes. To address these questions this article adopts dual perspective in terms of analyzing and understanding sensemaking processes. First, sensemaking of organizational actors is analyzed through a 'sensemaking of change' lens (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005; Balogun, 2006) in order to depict how sensemaking processes are shaped and enacted by an organization's change discourse. Second, a reflexive research methodology (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009) is adopted with the objective to surface the taken-for-grantedness in managing change process and to analyze the interdependent nature of macro-level discourses and sensemaking processes from a critical perspective.

This article contributes to the sensemaking of change literature by illustrating how change managerialism as macro-level discourse infiltrates in an organization's managerial change discourse and how it affects sensemaking micro-processes. More specifically, we describe how a macro-level discourse of change managerialism brackets off or constrains sensemaking micro-processes from lived experience by what we call sensemaking 'inhibitors'. These 'inhibitors' are factors that constrain ongoing sensemaking micro-processes in terms of quality rather than quantity. As sensemaking is a continuous process (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015), inhibiting factors refer to a change in sensemaking quality when the level of pre-interpretation increases and the sensemakers' thought-action repertoire narrows. By portraying the interweaving of change managerialism presumptions in the organization's discourse, we point at four inhibitors: lifeworld colonization, detachment, discursive closure, and constraining reflexivity. From a methodological point of view, adopting a reflexive research methodology that borrows heavily from a critically-inspired interpretative repertoire, unveils explicitly the taken-for-granted status of dynamics induced by mainstream change managerialism on sensemaking micro-process.

We proceed with an elaboration of our interpretive repertoire adopted, concentrating on sensemaking of organizational change, and change managerialism as critical perspective. After explicating the research methodology adopted, we present the case analysis consisting of the managerial change discourse, sensemaking micro-processes, and impact of change managerialism on the former two focusing on the vehicles that inhibit these micro-processes under the influence of change managerialism. The subsequent discussion focuses on the contributions to the sensemaking literature and presents arguments as to the performative effect of dominant macro-level discourses of organizational change on sensemaking micro-processes.

2. Change managerialism and sensemaking of organizational change

2.1. Making sense of organizational change

There is a growing sense among organizational scholars that current theorizing on organizational change does not adequately capture the lived reality of organizational change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). In order to remedy these shortcomings, a sensemaking lens (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick et al., 2005; Weick, 1995) towards change has been advanced to better comprehend the processes of organizational change from a phenomenological perspective. Framed in cognitive, social, and discursive processes, this lens emphasizes meaning construction

and structuring of reality during social interaction, a complex, idiosyncratic, interactive, retrospective and continual process through which captured cues are translated into meaningful information (Daft & Weick, 1984; Weick, 1979, 1995). One particularly relevant stream of work in this context relates to 'change recipient sensemaking', stressing the role of 'change recipient' interpretive schemes in interpreting and realizing organizational change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005; Balogun, 2006; Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2013): "Environmental forces are likely to initiate the change, but the way the environment is interpreted by organizational members affects the type of change that takes place" (Bartunek, 1984; p. 355). And it is this impact of 'the environment' on the sensemaking process that remains highly under researched in the current change and sensemaking literatures.

The sensemaking literature remains in this respect largely silent on how unexpressed contextual assumptions impact sensemaking processes (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weber & Glynn, 2006). Reviewing the sensemaking literature critically, Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015, p. 16) have pinpointed that "although the influence of the institutional context has been acknowledged, very few empirical studies have empirically investigated how this influence may occur". Research on sensemaking in organizations displays a predominant cognitive and social orientation, putting a premium on micro-level constructs in order to describe and analyze sensemaking processes, including discursive practices, language, identity, emotions, expectations, etc. (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). What remains unexplored is the explication of how a dominant 'macro-level discourse' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2012; Brown et al., 2014; Marcuse, 1968) guides or constrains sensemaking of organizational members, often in subtle and concealed ways. Indeed, frames of reference at macro, meso and micro level (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014) enable people to interpret organizational reality and make sense of equivocality, providing guidelines on how to enact meaning and respond to organizational change. It is this exploration of the "constitutive effects of macro-level discourse on sensemaking" (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; p. 98) that contains potential for better understanding how micro-processes of sensemaking are enacted, including the role of power and politics: "Quite overlooked, or certainly underplayed, are the social, cultural, economic, and political forces that shape what groups will notice, how they can act, with whom they interact, and the kinds of environments that can be collectively enacted." (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; p. 98). It is here where adopting a critical management perspective will contribute to fill the gap of how macro-level discourses impact micro-level sensemaking processes, and to provide cues as to how change managerialism impacts sensemaking during change implementation.

2.2. Bringing in a critical management perspective: change managerialism

Adding a critical management perspective to micro-processes of sensemaking allows for reflexive denaturalizing the existing order and unveiling the implied 'taken for granted-ness' (Alvesson, Bridgman, & Willmott, 2009) that are embedded in acts of organizing and managing. The objective thereby is to challenge "the authority of managerialism that saturates modern organizational life" (Phillips & Dar, 2009; p. 420). We draw in particular upon ideas of 'managerialism' (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011; Clegg, 2014; Locke & Spender, 2011; Parker, 2009) in order to critically analyze micro-processes of sensemaking and to shed light on hidden dynamics induced by certain managerial logics.

Managerialism is based upon a "view of managers as a distinct group (as opposed to non-managers) of (rational) actors providing

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